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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA POLITICAL UPDATE: DECEMBER 5

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

[11.](#) (C) After most opposition parties pulled out of the process, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) and its allies swept the December 4 National Assembly elections, according to preliminary results reported by the GOV. The MVR received more than two-thirds of the 167 seats, and GOV officials listed the rest of the parties with seats--all pro-GOV--as alleged proof of the "plural" new legislature. Venezuelan electoral watchdog Sumate continues to report procedural irregularities, the chief of which concerns GOV officials trying to coerce people to vote. The Spanish parliamentary delegations also apparently had strong concerns regarding the election process. The latest announcement of the National Electoral Council (CNE) put the abstention rate at 75 percent; opposition figures have alleged much higher figures. OAS delegation leader Ruben Perina told reporters election day the process was proceeding normally but refused to comment on reported problems. The key question remains how the European Union (EU) and Organization of American States (OAS) observation missions will publicly assess the election process. End summary.

[12.](#) (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez' Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) party and its allies swept the December 4 National Assembly elections, according to preliminary results announced in an official GOV press release. The MVR received 114 of the 167 National Assembly seats, improving on its previous representation of 69 deputies. The new total gives the MVR two seats more than the two-thirds of the legislature necessary to alter the constitution and pass organic laws. The party receiving the second highest total was pro-Chavez Podemos, with 18 seats, Podemos spokesmen claimed to reporters December 5. Patria Para Todos, another Chavista party, apparently secured 11 seats. The pro-GOV clone party Union of Electoral Winners and other local, indigenous, and minor parties sympathetic to the GOV received the rest of the 167 seats. Willian Lara, director of the MVR national tactical command, recited on air late December 4 a host of little-known pro-GOV parties that would receive seats as evidence of the "plurality" of the new National Assembly. Several other GOV ministers also publicly proclaimed the fairness of the election.

Reported Problems

[13.](#) (C) Venezuelan electoral watchdog Sumate's co-director Alejandro Plaz announced December 4 that 24 percent of the complaints Sumate received concerned the GOV coercing people to vote. Current opposition National Assembly deputy Pedro Diaz Blum told poloff December 4 Carabobo State government officials told him they had been threatened with dismissal for not voting. DAO sources reported that Venezuelan officials and the military were trying to intimidate people into voting (IIR SEPTTEL). PDVSA workers in Zulia State told poloff they were instructed to vote or not bother to return to work on Monday. Another complaint Plaz listed was the use of GOV vehicles to transport voters to the polls. Sumate co-director Maria Corina Machado claimed on air the night of December 4 that over a million people--one-third of the total voters--had cast their votes after 4:00 PM, when polls were initially scheduled to close.

Abstention

[14.](#) (C) Announced abstention rates have varied. The MVR initially reported 67 percent had abstained from voting, but the CNE later raised the figure to 75 percent, presumably as more votes were counted. A Smartmatic official told poloff the night of December 4 abstention was 70 percent. Opposition sources, meanwhile, have alleged that abstention rates were much higher. Sumate, for example, claimed its review of participation at a statistically valid set of

polling places revealed an 82 percent rate, according to press reports. Salas Roemer of Proyecto Venezuela indicated that according to his pollster, non-voters were at 92 percent at 4:00 PM. Venamcham's survey noted that absenteeism was 85 percent with a third of the votes cast as either null or blank.

15. (C) The GOV is arguing that the announced rates are consistent with historic norms. Interior Minister Jesse Chacon said opposition party Accion Democratica received a parliamentary majority with 11 percent of the national vote in 1998, although he somewhat disingenuously failed to report the percentage representing the national turnout. According to press reports, the highest abstention on record with the CNE was a rate of 76.2 percent recorded during the 2000 local elections. During the 2000 National Assembly elections, only 43.7 percent of the electoral registry did not vote, according to CNE statistics.

Observer Statements

16. (C) OAS delegation leader Ruben Perina told Globovision reporters on election day that the process was proceeding "normally and peacefully" but brushed off questions about the level of participation and reported problems, saying the OAS was still collecting data. (Note: Globovision was airing its broadcast December 4 on a one-hour delay, apparently to give itself time to self-censor material the GOV would declare objectionable.) Both the OAS and EU observer missions are expected to make official statements on December 16. Roberto Cuellar, director of the umbrella organization for CAPEL, the organization contracted by the CNE to audit the electoral registry, criticized the process for not including the fingerprint-capturing machines. (Note: Having a CNE-paid body act as an observer violates the U.N. declaration of principles and code of conduct for international election observation.) Another official linked to Cuellar's mission noted the low turnout observed in contrast to the August municipal elections.

17. (C) Spanish polcouns Gonzalo Fournier told poloff that the multi-partisan Spanish parliamentary delegation accredited by the CNE was concerned about the high abstention rate, the reliability of the machines to guarantee vote confidentiality, the military's presence in the voting

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centers, and the CNE's behavior leading up to and through the election. Fournier also believed, based on the delegation's observation, that abstention was higher than the CNE estimate. The Spanish delegation, which as accredited observers observed an audit in at least one opposition voting center, noted that the voting tally sheets (actas) registered that half the votes cast were for parties that had withdrawn from the election. The poll workers considered these "consciously nullified (i.e., by the voter) votes." If these votes were factored in, the abstention rate would probably be close to 80 percent, according to Fournier.

Comment

18. (C) Clearly the turnout for the National Assembly elections was extremely light, despite open intimidation efforts by government officials to get people to vote. That the government was willing to extend voting hours based on relatively specious justifications, even with the OAS and EU observers present, to try to increase the numbers, was not surprising. The only question that remains is how the EU and OAS missions will publicly portray their observation of the Venezuelan electoral process.

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